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ABSTRACT

The study of mass media and popular culture in a composition class allows students and teachers together to develop a critical awareness of television and advertising. Jerzy Kosinski's book, "Being There," a novel about the impact of television, is a beginning point for the study of television. Using that book as if it were a collection of events, pieces of evidence which may reveal a pattern, students can begin to form a statement that can be the thesis for an essay on television. A study of advertising may include awareness of the mythic and psychological appeals of advertising--study of the demographic backgrounds of advertising campaigns--or it may focus on the diction and essay structure in an advertisement. Another assignment which reveals popular culture consists of having students keep track of what they throw away for two or three days and then write an essay on what that reveals about themselves and society. Students might also consider how kitsch has demeaned the major rituals and celebrations such as death, marriage, birth, graduation, and retirement. Finally, students might write about a political speech and how media coverage affected their views on the subject. (TJ)

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Mining the Popular Culture:

The Mass Media and Freshman Composition

On a marble monument erected by the state, reports W.H. Auden, is engraved this touching elegy for the "Unknown Citizen," the contemporary mass man:

He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be

One against whom there was no official complaint, . . .

The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day

And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way. . .

Both Producers Research and High-Grade Living declare

He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Installment Plan

And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,

A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire. . .

Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:

Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.¹

We hardly need to remind ourselves, however, that the question is not absurd or that the way we answer it reveals our attitude towards the popular culture and mass media.

If there is a crisis in American education, many of us will surely argue that it is attributable, at least in part, to the seemingly mind-numbing insensitivity, the crushing weight of the popular culture and mass media. When we reason this way, for example, it seems axiomatic

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that the dedicated viewer of the "boob tube" is a "videot." Moreover, if we are candid with ourselves—and it is essential that we be candid when we face a crisis—many of us will probably confess that we see every day Auden's Modern Man in his adolescence, in those students in our classrooms who wear the regulation uniform of blue jeans or corduroy pants suits, hiking boots or Bass Wejuns, back packs or love pendants; in those students who express fashionable opinions with all the rigor of spilled quicksilver flowing across a table; in those students who communicate with all the fluent precision of Captain Marvel comic books. Are there any among us—and remember, we are being candid—who have not, over coffee with our colleagues, shared tales about such students?

But, of course, therein lies a problem. Is it fair to smile condescendingly at our students' dress when adults often choose the length of their hems or the width of their ties according to the latest whims of Halston or Gucci peddled through the local Sears or Penneys? Is it fair to criticize our students' judgments when those of adults are often no more precise than the latest issue of Time or the local newspaper? Is it fair to criticize the way our students speak and write when, for example, Jerry Brown tells an audience that he cannot "relate to that material possessory consciousness"; or, closer to home, when teachers themselves write memos, articles and books crammed with pedantic jargon?

At least for me, the answer to each of these questions is an unqualified "no," and the implications to that answer form the premises for a study of the mass media and popular culture in a writing class. The popular culture, as Dwight Macdonald reminds us, is Democracy with a vengeance: it levels us all. To study the popular culture and mass media in a writing class demands that we reconsider the conventional distinctions between students and teachers. In a mass society, all of us—

students and teachers alike—are consumers. Whether we buy Green Giant Garden Fresh Corn packaged in tin or grow our own green beans in the backyard, we have in a sense "consumed" a popular "lifestyle." Because we are consumers, we should know how to make intelligent choices, especially when so many of the choices offered to us are not choices at all. Is it really possible to make easy decisions when John Wayne's earnest pitch for Datril 500 is followed by David Janssen's equally earnest plug for Excedrin? Finally, we should be certain that our choices, when at last we make them, are good ones. If I eat Wonder Bread am I actually twelve ways stronger than if I get my bulk from the sawdust sprinkled into loaves of Fresh Horizons?

I know that I am not suggesting anything particularly novel. Study of the mass media and popular culture has become an accepted part of large numbers of freshman writing classes. The March 1976 issue of the English Journal devoted its entire contents to the subject as did the April 1977 issue of College English.² The Journal of Popular Culture has given the subject academic respectability, and numbers of reading anthologies focused on popular culture and the mass media have been printed by nearly every major publishing house.³ In the presence of such abundance, it would be foolish not to consume, and consume we have at Purdue.

For the past eight years we have offered English 101M and 102M, or Mass Media Composition, as the major elective for students in our two-semester composition sequence. Although the overall enrollment in all our composition courses has remained stable for the past two years—if, that is, an enrollment of nearly nine thousand students connotes stability—the enrollment in Mass Media Composition has increased over 50% in the same period: from about 300 in 1975 to nearly 500 this year. Diligent advertising helps to boost our enrollment; each year I meet with scores of undergraduate

advisers in order to sell our program. Testimonials from our consumers also help; students do enjoy the course and do learn to write, as results from pre- and post-tests of the "basics" partially indicate.

Now I do not want to suggest that we have found the promised land in West Lafayette, Indiana; after all, West Lafayette is really just the "hub of the mid-North tier," or so our local television station reminds us. But, since Professor Imscher advised me that my audience would be interested to know what works and why, let me shift direction. One advance warning, however: even though I am fairly confident that I can describe what works in our approach to television and advertising, I am not confident that I can tell you precisely why it works.

I am sure that some of you are wondering why we study the "boob tube," that source of declining SAT scores, that evil box which destroys the imagination of the young, that agent of violence in our culture. We should have learned something from Stephen Gosson, for that Puritan saw long ago the evils of a popular medium:

Small are the abuses, and slight are the faults, that now
in Theaters escape the Poets pen: But tall Cedars, from little
grains shoot high: great Oaks, from slender roots spread wide:
. . . Therefore, he that will avoid the open shame of privy
sin, the common plague of private offenses, . . . must set
hand to the stern, and eye to his steps, to shun the occasion
as near as he can.⁴

Recalling Gosson's fervid criticisms of Renaissance drama is instructive for those who study television. It is foolish to "shun the occasion," to avoid a study of television, unless we want to be modern-day Puritans who attack every script writer and unplug every TV set in the land. It is important to open a debate about television, not to close one.

The approach we take at Purdue is cautious. By reading Jerzy Kosinski's Being There, a provocative novel about the impact of television upon the mass culture, a debate about that medium can be stimulating and not the occasion for an instructor's sermonizing. There is often a problem, of course, in bringing literature into the composition class, for the temptation is to study literature qua literature. Richard Larson argues convincingly, however, that it is possible to use literature in a way that teaches composition students how to evaluate the importance of completed events, or to make and support generalizations, or to develop fresh insights from limited evidence, or to articulate and evaluate value judgments.⁵ All of these approaches are helpful, but I tend to emphasize the use of literature in the formation of a thesis.

Purists may shudder at this, but at the outset of a discussion of Being There, I encourage my students to consider the novel not as fiction but as a collection of events, pieces of evidence which may reveal a pattern. First I ask them to help me list on the chalkboard those events which intrigue them in any order which interests them. They tend to emphasize those events which illustrate the inability of Kosinski's protagonist, Chance, to communicate clearly, to form loving relationships, to feel anger, to discern psychological motivations. Once a list of this sort is constructed, I next ask my students to infer from it a statement which might be the thesis for an essay on television. At first, they voice rather vague comments: "How TV is bad"; or "What TV does"; or "Why we shouldn't watch TV." At this point, I insist that these comments be turned back to the evidence; eventually we arrive, as a recent class did, at a statement such as "TV affects people negatively."

Now, what does "affect negatively" precisely mean? Because we have a key term to define, I direct my students once again back to the evidence, and

it does not take too long for them to sharpen their initial "thesis." In fact, a recent class finally developed this thesis: "Television inhibits a person's ability to communicate, to reason or imagine, and to feel love or hate." It should be evident that such a thesis does not limit a student's essay solely to Kosinski's novel, nor does it prevent him from exploring the thesis from a variety of perspectives. A student who disagrees with it at least has a starting point he has helped to develop, and by adducing counter evidence, he can reject or modify it. Or, as one of my students recently wrote, "More people have become aware of the truly detrimental influence of television, commenting in astounding detail on the adverse effects of television while watching their favorite soap opera." Would that more critics of television displayed that student's insight.

The same openness to discussion governs our study of advertising, approaches to which are as limitless as the ingenuity of students. They can study the psychological or mythic appeals of advertising and thereby learn something about persuasion. Or they can study the demographic backgrounds of advertising campaigns and thereby learn something about audience. Yet another approach applies the rhetorical triangle to advertising. When students see that the limited verbal content of many advertisements force a copywriter into developing quirky personae and suggestive visual appeals, they begin to realize the need for rhetorical balance. What has worked best for me, however, is a study of advertising as a focus on diction and essay structure. Why these approaches work is that D.G. Kehl preceded me in his immensely informative and lucid essay "The Electric Carrot," presented before the 1974 CCCC.⁶

Kehl shows us that connotation, denotation, stylistic choices, neologisms, euphemism, and slang can all be studied through advertising. He

is absolutely correct, yet advertising is also a tradition shaped through time by the individual talents of copywriters. By way of illustration, consider the following selected copy with me. First, from "Somewhere West of Laramie," a brilliant 1918 advertisement for the Jordan Motor Car:

The truth is—the Playboy was built for her.

Built for the lass whose face is brown with the sun when
the day is done of revel and romp and race.

She loves the cross of the wild and the tame.

There's a savor of links about that car—of laughter and
lilt and light—a hint of old loves—and saddle and quirt.
It's a brawny thing—yet a graceful thing for a sweep o'
the avenue.

Next, from a 1958 Edsel advertisement:

Step into an Edsel and you'll learn where the excitement is
this year.

Other drivers spot that classic vertical grille a block away—
and never fail to take a long look at this year's most exciting
car. . .

And parked in front of your home, your Edsel always gets even
more attention—because it always says a lot about you.

Finally, from a recent advertisement for the new diesel Oldsmobile:

This new 5.7 litre diesel V8 makes possible a new level of
fuel efficiency in full-size cars. For Delta 88 and 98, the
EPA estimates are 30 mpg in the highway tests; 21 mpg in city
tests; 24 mpg, composite. For Custom Cruiser, the figures are

27 mpg, highway; 19 mpg, city; 22 mpg, composite.

In miniature, these selections register our continuing fascination with the automobile, a fascination recorded in the diction of the copy. The assonance and alliteration, the balance of the abstract and concrete, the sense of freedom evident in the Jordan advertisement has completely disappeared from the Oldsmobile advertisement, with its talk of litres, fuel efficiency, and EPA estimates. And the poor Edsel, doomed it seems by its copywriters, for what is "exciting" about the fact that the Edsel "always says a lot about you?" Perverse, perhaps, but scarcely exciting. The importance of such a survey for students is that it demonstrates the varying ways that diction registers the writer's voice, his commitment to a topic.

Even more, the quasi-technical diction of the Oldsmobile advertisement transfers into other advertisements. If we assume that technical diction is used, in the words of Sergeant Friday, to give us the "facts, ma'am, just the facts," should we be suprised at this copy in an advertisement for Fact cigarettes?

I'm realistic. I only smoke Facts.

FACT 1: We don't want your taste buds to go to sleep.

FACT reduces the aldehyde gases that we believe muddy the flavor of fine tobaccos so you can enjoy wide-awake taste.

FACT 2: We have smoke scrubbers in our filter.

These Purite scrubbers work like magnets to reduce these same aldehydes and let the fine flavor come through.

FACT 3: We have a patent on flavor in low 'tar' cigarettes:

#3828800.

Our Purite filter helps deliver flavor in a way so new we've been able to patent it.

Add it all up. Low gas, low 'tar,' great flavor.

That's a FACT.

The copy seems to read something like a thesis and support essay. The thesis is "I'm realistic. I only smoke Facts"; the evidence, Fact reduces gases, Purite scrubbers work like magnets, the Purite filter is patented. The conclusion: "Add it all up." But the appearance of such a division is not the fact, for none of the "evidence" supports the "thesis." If we follow Kehl's lead and complete the enthymeme, for example, to the first "argument," we can see that the "evidence" in the advertisement tells us nothing about the pitchman's sense of the realistic. The major premise is clear: "We don't want your tastebuds to go to sleep"; so also is the minor premise: removing aldehyde gases wakes your tastebuds up. But the conclusion, "I'm realistic," is just as clearly a non sequitur. In leading your students through advertisements of this sort, which violate an awareness that the conclusion of a deductive argument is often a writer's thesis, you can begin to open up the "canned essay." When students write by paying more attention to the time-honored divisions of introduction, development and conclusion than to the organic and logical relationships among these divisions, it is no wonder that their essays may be filled with facts which filter out all the meaning.

Having opened up the "canned essay," however, one must take care that its contents are not wormy. Luckily, advertising, the same medium which enables students to sense the problems of the "canned essay," also enables them to sense the value of logical evidence. A case in point occurred last summer in the spirited exchange between Tylenol and Bayer aspirin

advertisements. It was an Ali-Spinks sort of fight, but this time the split decision gave the victory to the establishment's champion rather than the hustling young newcomer.

The aspirin side-effects of heartburn, nausea, allergic reactions, and stomach bleeding, the makers of Tylenol gravely advised us, are "why doctors recommend TYLENOL more than all leading aspirin brands combined." Ever vigilant, the outraged producers of Bayer aspirin shot back "Tylenol, shame on you!" They reminded us, as an avuncular family physician might, "look closely at the words in the Tylenol headline . . . 'more than all leading aspirin brands combined.'" Having told us to pay attention to diction, the Bayer advertisement went on with its own form of name-calling: the acetaminophen in Tylenol causes liver damage. Beaten in the opening rounds, Tylenol tried fancy footwork in later advertising. Tylenol advertisements now began to insist that "hospitals dispense TYLENOL more than all leading aspirin brands combined." One might have expected the champion to shuffle in response; instead Bayer advertising brought learned authority to the argument: the FTC indicates that acetaminophen does cause liver damage, and even the AMA says that "aspirin is the drug of choice."

If anyone feels that advertising is not, at root, a serious business, let him review these advertisements. For students inclined to feel that way, a study of the adduction of evidence, the support of a proposition, and the reaction to counter arguments in these advertisements should reveal a great deal. Advertisements, like essays, are persuasive. The copywriter for the Tylenol advertisements overstated his case, fudged the evidence, and did not anticipate counter arguments. Left the opening, the established champion counterpunched with a hard left hook; presumably, fight fans were relieved.

In suggesting some approaches to advertising and television, I have

neglected the contributions of my staff, graduate students whose energy and inventiveness cannot be over praised. As a way of revealing other approaches to the mass media and popular culture, let me share with you, briefly, some of their writing assignments. The first is a detailed assignment on advertising:

Find a series of at least three (but probably no more than three) advertisements—each for a different product or brand—that appeal to a certain audience. Through examining the ads, define the audience and how the ads aim to appeal to that audience. In order to do this you will probably want to consider physical details in the ads, colors used and their emotional appeal, language used, type of magazine in which the ad appeared and its probable audience (we can safely assume that a pacifist isn't reading Guns and Ammo, for instance), persona of the ad (authoritative, patronizing, friendly). You will probably want to limit your consideration of these items to no more than three and remember to tie your considerations to a single purpose or thesis.

The next assignment appeals to the thrifty student anthropologist:

Many social scientists but few college students are in the habit of studying the trivia of daily life for what it can tell us about our society or ourselves. For a two or three day period keep an exact record of everything you throw away. Later, group these items into distinct categories and suggest what they might tell someone else about you and the kind of society you live in.

Yet another assignment reminds students of their public roles:

Can anyone escape kitsch? Can the dead escape it? Most come—

teries are filled with it. Death today is a candied affair, coated with sentiment and dipped in bathos. Choose one ritual or celebration which everyone must deal with—birth, death, marriage, graduation, retirement—and show how kitsch has demeaned it.

Finally, this assignment suggests that paying attention has its rewards:

Last spring, President Carter announced an "energy crisis." Television news programs extensively covered his address to the public and Congress. News magazines and their advertising clients responded quickly to the announcement. Some affirmed and some denied that an "energy crisis" existed; some accepted his plans and others proposed solutions of their own for dealing with the "crisis." Consider: were you aware that an "energy crisis" existed before the speech? How did the media coverage affect your views?

By outlining this morning some approaches to television and advertising which have worked at Purdue, I am revealing my hope that they will work for you. There are unique advantages for a writing class which studies the mass media and popular culture. When students become teachers and teachers become students, it is next to impossible for a writing class to become deathly dull. If we seek to develop a critical awareness of contemporary culture in our students, then we must be open to the full range of experiences which the mass media offer us. As Edmund Carpenter points out, each mass medium "offers a different perspective, a way of seeing an otherwise hidden dimension of reality . . . taken together, [the mass media] give us a more complete whole, a greater truth."⁷ When we mine the popular culture, we may not find rich veins of gold and silver, but it is better to have "dug it" vigorously than never to have "dug it" at all.

Notes

- ¹ W. H. Auden, "The Unknown Citizen," in The Major Poets: English and American, 2nd ed., ed. Charles M. Coffin and Gerrit Hubbard Roelofs (1954; rpt. New York: Harcourt, 1969), pp. 537-38.
- ² English Journal, 65, no. 3 (1976); College English, 38 (1977).
- ³ I find the following anthologies most helpful: William M. Hammel, ed., The Popular Arts in America: A Reader, 2nd ed. (1972; rpt. New York: Harcourt, 1977); Donald McQuade and Robert Atwan, ed., Popular Writing in America: The Interaction of Style and Audience, shorter, alternate ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977); Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lynn M. Berk, ed., The New Languages: A Rhetorical Approach to the Mass Media and Popular Culture (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977); Fredric Rissover and David C. Birch, eds., Mass Media and the Popular Arts, 2nd ed. (1972; rpt. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977); Francis H. Voelker and Ludmilla A. Voelker, ed., Mass Media: Forces in Our Society, 3rd ed. (1972; rpt. New York: Harcourt, 1978).
- ⁴ Stephen Gosson, The Schoole of Abuse (1579; rpt. New York: Garland, 1973), sig. C5^V-C5^F. I have modernized ^{Gosson's} spelling.
- ⁵ Richard L. Larson, "Learning about Rhetoric from Writing about Literature," College English, 32 (1971), 679-87.
- ⁶ D.G. Kehl, "The Electric Carrot: The Rhetoric of Advertisement and the Art of Persuasion," CCCC Convention, Anaheim, 1974; also in Hugh Rank, ed., Language and Public Policy (Urbana: NCTE, 1974), pp.

52-64.

7 Edmund Carpenter, "The New Languages," in The New Languages,
ed. Ohlgren and Berk, p. 12.